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Banging the Other Side of the Saucepan:

Changing Political Activism and Performance of Citizenship among Argentina's Middle Class 2001-13

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Introduction

Between May 2012 and April 2013 Argentina's urban centres bore witness to several enormous anti-government protests. Led by sectors of the middle class¹, these actions marked the return of this historically important and mobilised political actor to the nation's centre stage on a scale not seen since the 2001-02 social uprisings.

This chapter explores changes and continuities in patterns of middle-class citizens' political activism and their performance of citizenship, class, race and nationality between these two moments. Based upon an ethnographic study including observation and interviews with primarily non-activist citizens in 2011 (during the months leading up to the following year's protests), it seeks to comprehend how research participants made sense of their citizenship and the rights it bestowed. It explores their perceptions of their own position vis-à-vis other social sectors and how they believed that aspects of their rights were being violated. How these understandings influenced their political engagement and how these potentially informed the 2012 mass anti-government protests is examined, drawing out comparisons with the literature on those who participated in the 2001-02 protests.

The Middle Class and the 2001-02 Protests

The 2001-02 uprising occurred within the context of Argentina's most serious economic and political crisis in history. This included a debt default, mass unemployment of 25 percent and the pauperisation of seven million middle-class citizens (INDEC database). Whilst it was a popular multi-sectoral revolt, it was characterised by widespread participation from the middle class.² Citizens' faith in the institutions of representative democracy collapsed and the demand *¡que se vayan todos!* [get rid of them all!] encapsulated the zeitgeist of the time. There was widespread recognition that the neoliberal model of President Carlos Menem (1989-99) and then Fernando De La Rúa's (1999-2001) governments had been a disaster and that the corruption-ridden, representative democratic system had been exhausted. Bourgeoning protest movements sought to replace this model with a fairer, more participatory society based around social solidarity (Adamovsky, 2009). Millions of middle-class citizens engaged in radical, self-organised, non-party political collective experiments in participatory democracy and horizontal decision-making such as neighbourhood assemblies, participatory budgeting, cultural movements and barter clubs. Through these actions a concerted attempt was made to transform society for the benefit of all.

Narratives of contention and the performance of class were represented in popular chants, *cacerolazos* [saucepan protests] and in the neighbourhood assemblies' discourse. These focused around solidarity with "the other"; in particular between progressive elements of the middle class and structurally poor and working-class movements, including the *piqueteros*³ [road-blockers] (Svampa and Corral, 2006).

Historically, Argentina enjoyed the largest, most politically-influential middle class in Latin America. Several waves of European immigration established an upwardly mobile and aspirational population during the early-twentieth century. General Juan Perón's government (1946-55) enacted income redistribution policies and free university education which aided the sentiment of belonging to the middle class at the time. The legacy is that almost nine in ten Argentinians believe they are so today (UP-TNS Gallup, 2015). Yet this falls to 47% if income is taken as a measure of class using the World Bank's US\$ 10 per day criteria (CCR, 2015). If a Marxist definition is applied (managers, property owners and the supervisors of exploitation), the figure is a fraction of this.

“Born out of politics” as a reaction to the rise of Perón and his *Justicialista* (Peronist) movement (Adamovsky, 2009), elements of the ruling elites took fright at how as an anti-clerical, nationalising President, he strengthened labour rights and wages and encouraged the industrial working class to strike against large employers. In response, these elites responded with attempts to co-opt sectors of the working class and dilute the subaltern resistance by imbuing in them a middle-class identity via their influence in mass media and cultural institutions. Modernisation theory was advanced, promoting ideals of “progress”, “whiteness” and “decency.” Peronism was conveyed as creating indiscipline, immorality, laziness, violence and backwardness, similarly to the anti-egalitarian discourses discussed by Shakow (this volume). Following the *Revolución Libertadora* [Freedom Revolution] civil-military uprising which eventually overthrew Peron in 1955, the state expanded its attempts to create the idea of “the middle-class Argentinian”. Underlying racial prejudices were also seized upon by elites, inventing the “threat” of the *Mestizo* shantytown-dwelling poor (Guano, 2004). Symbolic violence began to permeate everyday language and elite culture. Simultaneously, the 19th century “civilisation vs barbarism” dichotomy, immortalised by the writings of former Argentinian President Domingo Sarmiento, was evoked to pit the former as the national project of “progress” against the forces of backwardness among this newly-conscious middle class (Adamovsky, 2009).

Curiously, as with the 2012-13 protests, this fervent opposition to Peronism emerged among many who had gained economically from its governments. Here lay the origins of a deep social fissure (*la grieta*) that pitted Peronism vs Radicalism, “Barbarism vs Civilisation”, “Europeanism vs Latin Americanism” and the “*Mestizo* vs White”, representing two distinct visions of national projects that continue to prevail today.

Several arguments have been forwarded to explain middle-class participation in the 2001-02 protests. Schamis (2002) argues that the legacy of a weak post-dictatorship “delegative democracy” allowed 1990s *Menemismo* to bolster subnational authoritarianism via provincial caudillos. Flourishing corruption and nepotism then led to anger around the failures of political representation by 2001 (Schamis, 2002).

Onuch (2014) argues that the infringement of civil rights in the context of politico-economic crises crossed a collective threshold of political patience, together with the internal division of

elites, involvement from foreign actors, as well as the intensification of activist protests in general.

Others posit that middle-class mobilisation was strongly influenced by the national imaginary (Ozarow, 2014; Armony and Armony, 2005). During the 1990s the meaning of “belonging to the middle class” was reconfigured as citizenship became more closely associated with capacity for consumption (rather than occupation or education) when the government’s 1991-2001 Convertibility model tied the value of the peso to the US Dollar. This made it relatively much more affordable to purchase imported consumer durables, cars, computers, mobile phones and take foreign holidays. The government and media claimed that Argentina had become a “middle-class country” with the population able to enjoy purchasing power on a par with their European or North American counterparts.

Yet following the country’s debt default and currency devaluation when Convertibility suddenly ended, this myth of being middle class, and the country having fulfilled its “historic destiny” of national greatness were exposed. Purchasing power was decimated and mass unemployment and impoverishment expanded into the middle class.

The disparity between raised material hopes and the inability to fulfil them in practice, is arguably what sparked the outbreak of mass protest in 2001 and is described by James Davies in *When Men Revolt and Why* (1971) as a prime factor in explaining social uprisings. That movement sought to “indict” those in the political elites who had deceived them.

But what of the notion of “being middle class” and its ability to advance collective demands- in Argentina? In reality both in 2001 and historically, it has proved to be more of an obstacle to collective action and has rarely been used as a framing mechanism to mobilise this class. Some analyses understood 2001 to be a defensive response to rapid downward mobility for fear of social descent and eventual proletarianisation (Ollier 2003). Under this interpretation, action in solidarity with other social actors was purely to avoid sinking into the working class. Yet contrary evidence suggests that much of the cross-class solidarity at the time was not defensive but idealistic, extending far beyond and outliving the collective protests. Many lower middle-class neighbourhood assemblies were precisely those that most vehemently defended the poor and workers’ resistances (Svampa and Corral, 2006). A study by *Nueva Mayoría* (2006) showed that 40 percent of assembly members hailed from the middle class. Yet they never

specifically called for their own class' defence, instead supporting all sectors who had suffered since the crisis.

As a collective identity, middle-classness is usually expressed covertly in public protest, as explicit attempts at promoting the defence of the "middle class" have proved disastrous. For instance the Middle-Class Movement in 1956 only ever had three hundred members. It was run by members of the upper class, failed to make any impression and folded within a year (Adamovsky, 2009). In 2001-02, assemblies and movements largely avoided referring to the middle class in communiques and discourse, with appeals instead more often being made to "the people." Participants self-identified as "neighbours" (Svampa and Corral, 2006).

This distinction between the public performance of class, which was expressed through association with "the people" in 2001, and the strong private attachment to a "middle-class" identity which endured the crisis (two-thirds of Argentinians maintained such self-identification despite their unemployment or pauperisation (Grimson, 2005)), seems contradictory. However to understand it we must return to the intersectionality between nation and class in Argentina. Dating back to the time of General Juan Perón, "the worker" was extolled along with the mythological *pueblo argentino* [Argentinian people] and this became embedded in the national psyche. Political parties of all descriptions have since tended to avoid directing their campaigns at any one specific social group or class. The notion of the "middle class" has since adopted anti-popular connotations.

Nevertheless during the 2001 crisis, for the first time since the 1950s there were some explicit attempts to both mobilise and placate the middle class as a collective entity. At the level of elite politics, (Peronist leader) Eduardo Duhalde began defending the middle class in his 2001 speeches. In Mendoza, the Middle Class Housing Plan was enacted. The Argentinian Confederation of Medium-Sized Companies (CAME) began to openly call for a rebellion "in defence of the impoverished middle class" in December 2001 (Adamovsky, 2009, 449). The short-lived Middle-Class Defence Front was formed in Rosario and in leading daily, *Página 12* the cartoon strip, "Rep" openly called upon readers to join a middle-class revolt (Adamovsky, 2009).

This return of "the middle class" as a mobilising identity can only be explained by the overwhelming fear many citizens felt when faced with an enormous scale of proletarianisation.

Social movements and elite actors were confronted with choices about whether this fear outweighed the risks of using an “anti-popular” discourse. Those like the CAME decided in favour of explicitly promoting their own perceived class interests, whilst the assembly movements tended to opt against.

Whether the middle-class was capable of achieving transformative change through their demand-making at the time is doubtful if one refers to a “community psychology” approach, as it highlights differences in how struggling middle class and structurally impoverished communities confronted their respective situations (Saforcada et al, 2007). Among shantytown and working-class barrio residents, internal solidarity and their associated movements like the *piqueteros* or assemblies in poorer neighbourhoods outlasted the crisis. Yet those in the middle class who suffered rather sudden pauperisation, after the initial few months of political revolt tended to slide back towards private coping strategies, and social solidarity broke down. This was due to a deep-rooted individualism and belief in self-sufficiency and individual freedom, as well as growing preoccupations about crime and the sanctity of their private property. Their contingent demands for systemic change also rapidly faded and most eventually capitulated to supporting the reformist Kirchner government of 2003 (Mazzoni, 2008). The conservatism of many in the middle class was highlighted by a wave of high-profile kidnappings, including the murder of student Axel Blumberg, concerns which generated a sizable protest movement during the Blumberg demonstrations of 2004 and 2006. These attracted a strong middle-class presence around the authoritarian demands for harsher penal laws, a transfer of power to the police and security forces and a repressive clamp-down on crime. This prevented those outside the progressive wing of the middle class from creating an organised and sustained political response to the crisis of political legitimacy (Ozarow, 2012).

Mazzoni (2008, 219) describes the struggling middle class as “low-impact citizens” due to their advanced political critique and the intensity of their verbal demands, yet limited expectations of their social and economic citizenship (what the state should provide for them). Their commitment to actually taking the necessary political action to change things was limited to voting due to their minimalist understanding of citizenship. Despite the crisis of representation they continued to demonstrate subordination towards their political representatives.

Certainly class was an important factor in the performance of contentious politics during 2001-02 and one that determined which repertoires of protest were adopted. Among the range of

movements, the *piqueteros* were understood to be a movement of the unemployed, who demanded food, work, housing and social welfare plans. The worker-recovered companies' movement were largely blue-collar and trade union marches were often stigmatised due to their bureaucracies' complicity with or capitulation to prior neoliberal governments. However, the neighbourhood assemblies were a more attractive proposition for many of the middle class, seen as a more acceptable and sophisticated form of subversion. Through this tool of direct democracy, the nation's political, economic and social problems were discussed and intellectualised in mass gatherings in open public spaces as an affront to the delegitimised national ruling class. The performance of middle-class discontent in 2001-02, often in the form of *cacerolazos*, was depicted by the media and academic studies as "spontaneous", "autonomous" of political parties, "peaceful", and territorialised in the neighbourhood vicinity. Thus, the pots and pans protests soon came to also symbolise middle-class resistance during subsequent protests in Argentina, like the 2004 Blumberg demonstrations, the 2008 "Countryside Conflict," and again in the 2012-13 anti-government demonstrations, as they did in Iceland, Spain and Greece in their respective middle class-led uprisings in 2011-12. Carrying saucepans during protests allowed citizens to express their anger with the government, whilst saving face regarding any personal financial difficulties they were experiencing. Through the *cacerolazos* they could enunciate their individual middle-class identity through a distinct protest repertoire which distinguished them from trade union, blue-collar or unemployed citizens' groups

The fieldwork study

Six months of fieldwork in Argentina were conducted from March to August 2011. Several research methods were triangulated. The author conducted participant observation in middle-class citizens' local communities, their working and social lives, noting and interpreting the systems of meanings participants attached to a variety of research themes mentioned in the introduction.

Concurrently, interviews were conducted with 30 middle-class citizens (12 men and 18 women) in Spanish. Six were aged 20-29, six 30-39, four 40-49, ten 50-59 and four 60+. Only three were political activists. Because of the timing of the research, these individuals did not necessarily take part in the 2012 protests. Rather the opinions and attitudes expressed by those in the sample are assumed to provide clues to the underlying individual and collective

grievances that provided the grounds for the anti-government protests which followed a few months later, when the largely middle-class protestors were able to mobilise sufficient resources to take action as described in Resource Mobilisation Theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The interview responses and observations were then analysed thematically and comparisons drawn with the literature on middle-class citizens' activism and performance of citizenship during the 2001-02 protests.

Participants were selected for interview from a market-research agency database if they a) held a professional qualification, owned a small business or had a university degree (or were currently studying for one); b) owned their home (or were adult children of those who did) and c) worked in a profession, highly-skilled job or ran a business (or were adult children of those who did), indicating their middle-class status based on a pre-interview questionnaire. Self-selection problems were avoided as only one qualifying participant declined to be interviewed. Home visits were made to gentrified districts of five large cities –Buenos Aires, La Plata, Rosario, Santa Fe and Posadas– and Piedras Blancas, a rural village in Entre Rios Province. This helped to inform some observations about regional and urban/rural differences.

The Middle Class and the 2012-13 Protests

In contrast to the 2001 rebellion, middle-class participants in the mass protests of 2012 abandoned the hope of achieving a wide-ranging societal transformation. The movement goals of solidarity and the construction of new democratic, participatory and horizontal economic and political structures were replaced by a narrower focus on indicting reformist-Peronist President Cristina Kirchner who they accused of corruption and authoritarianism. Internal enemies such as “the poor” were blamed for the nation's problems, replacing the entire political establishment, globalisation and the IMF who were deemed responsible in 2001-02 (Ozarow, 2012). Materialistic concerns, such as ending inflation and currency controls, became key demands in 2012. As with 2001, the protests themselves remained non-party political, self-organised and centred on the *cacerolazos*. However, this time they occurred during a period of comparative economic stability, low unemployment and amidst acute political polarisation. While the objectives were very different, the protests symbolised that many of the preoccupations of 2001, such as a perceived lack of democratic accountability, corruption and

lack of faith in the political establishment, had remained unresolved (Svampa, 2012). Whilst middle-class participation in both sets of protests was significant, there was a higher presence of upper middle-class citizens in 2012 compared to 2001.

As a heterogeneous actor both socio-economically and also politically, there were of course many within the middle class who supported the objectives of both movements, neither of them, and one or the other. However some generalisations can be inferred.

Citizenship as “an occasional identity”

Certain parallels can be drawn in the interviewees’ 2011 dominant discourses which suggest continuities with those reported in 2001-02. Almost all participants expressed disdain for politicians, parties and politics in general, understanding them to have violated their sense of political citizenship and associating them with “corruption” and “dirt”. Among the over-40s this tended to engender a sense of powerlessness. Eight confessed that although they had supported the idea of *Que se vayan todos* in 2001, the fact that many of the same faces had returned to the political scene and corruption continued made them feel resigned and actually demobilised them from political activity. For younger Argentinians this acted as a motivator to engage in political activism such as protest blackouts or to participate in social movements such as the *Frente Popular Darío Santillán* or political parties like the Socialist Party.

Another important continuity was the perceived ongoing crisis of representation from 2001. Most (22) interview participants struggled to mention a *current* politician they felt represented them. Only a handful did so, citing Cristina Kirchner or then-opposition Deputy Elisa Carrió among others. More often *historical* figures like Perón, Che Guevara or radical Presidents like Alfonsín (1983-89) or Frondizi (1958-62) were referenced. The lack of faith in political institutions extended to the trade unions, which half the sample viewed negatively. They were often described as “mafias”. A minority of five expressed that they felt represented by charities, the Church, media or their trade union.

An interesting paradox was observed. Despite the near universal sense of anti-politics, the act of voting continued to be central to middle-class citizens’ understanding of their citizenship. This was true even among those who were the most scathing of politicians or could be

categorised as “apolitical”. The *liberal* model of political citizenship tends to be hegemonic in contemporary constitutional democracies. Citizens restrict themselves to entrusting the business of law-making to representatives rather than engaging actively (Walzer, 1989). This notion was found to be almost universally accepted among the sample. With the exception of three cases, collective protest engagement was minimal, with the widely-advocated 2001 notion of participatory democracy now deemed unworkable. I term how participants relate to their citizenship as an “occasional identity”.

To some extent the Kirchner governments since 2003 had attempted to implement some of the demands of the 2001 uprisings, especially for more active citizen participation in political and economic decision-making in the nation’s institutions. The application of more republican notions of citizenship to policy-making through their National-Popular project are exemplified by the creation of the 2004 National Institute for the Associative and Social Economy, support for worker-recovered enterprises and cooperatives (Ozarow and Croucher, 2014) and the 2014 *National Programme for Participatory Budgeting*.

However these republican conceptualisations of citizenship had little resonance among interviewees, only a couple of whom mentioned participation in such projects. Historical factors such as the legacy of the dictatorship -meaning they valued the act of voting even if there was no candidate or party they believed in- were commonly cited, as was the fear that not voting would lead to anarchy (understood as a breakdown of *order* and threat to their property). Several participants (12) described voting as the “least worst option” (*mal menor*).

The political class is a necessary evil because when all is said and done yes there is corruption but they bring a certain order to things. Even the way they are corrupt is orderly! Without them, well we’d be halfway towards anarchy no? [Laughs].

Brian, 37, Rosario

Half of the sample (15) mentioned that although they always make sure that they vote, they doubted that voting would change anything. Abstention or ballot-spoiling was seen as maintaining the status quo, in contrast to 2001 when one fifth of voters spoiled their legislative election ballot papers and a further quarter abstained (despite compulsory voting).

I am going to struggle to vote this year ... We have to vote for somebody... Spoiling my vote? That's not the solution either. In reality we shouldn't vote for anyone but we haven't done that en masse since 2001 so we aren't going to change things that way.

Lucía, 63, Posadas

Six participants were somewhat conspiratorial, explaining that the winners were pre-determined.

But I don't really care who I vote for. That's the most pathetic thing. I don't care... because it's all fixed anyway.

Jorge, 36, La Plata

There was a general feeling that they were being represented badly and that most politicians of all persuasions were corrupt and self-serving. The only participants who spoke positively about politics were Matias (21) from Posadas, the son of a politician, and Martin (50), a resident of the rural village of Piedras Blancas who described politics as "beautiful". In this village, national politicians were generally held in higher regard. Labels such as "corrupt", "dirty" and "thieves" were less frequent in their discourse than among interviewees in the urban centres.

Mazzoni's notion of "low-impact citizens" (2008) still widely applied in 2011. Participants' radical analyses of how society functions (often critical, anti-systemic, even Marxist) and their damning condemnations of their own subjugation were not matched by engagement in action to contest it. Indeed some of the governments' fiercest critics like the two below actually expressed the very anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist views that one can find in Kirchnerist discourse. Somehow the government was failing to win over those who should have been its natural allies.

The main problem we have is one of dependence. All our riches are being stolen by the Americans... by the English.

Luis, 57, Santa Fe

The world's wealth is owned by just 270 powerful men. Via their minions, the rest of us are exploited day after day. They will only stop us from rising up by giving us just about enough of the crumbs to survive.

Carlos, 78, Buenos Aires

From passive dissidence to mobilisation

Despite interviewees' wholesale disdain for the political class, the act of "doing politics" was limited to the confines of "giving opinions". Among the two-thirds of participants (19) who held negative views of the current Kirchner government, it was as if a cauldron of grievances was heating up that would explode at some point. Given the lack of political opportunities to join collective protests, assemblies or other contentious actions, many harboured feelings of resignation. Dissidence only manifested itself passively.

I don't believe that the people have any power..... They don't have it. We have to make do with a system that grants us elections to vote for people who don't represent us.

Franco, 35, Posadas

In addressing the question of what it would take for them to convert their citizenship from "passive" to "active" through participation in collective actions, interviewees insinuated that they lacked the belief things could change. To rebel without a critical mass would be pointless but also potentially risky. This participant used the following analogy:

My relatives in the USA always ask me "why I don't rebel?" Well there is a certain degree of impotence. Imagine that you are herding cows, sheep or whatever with dogs and whips. You bring them along with you and they all follow. None of the animals rebel because they know that the consequences of doing so would be immediate and dangerous.

Carlos, 78, Buenos Aires

"Self-sufficiency" appeared embedded in interviewees' belief systems. They appeared reluctant to transform any economic grievances into action, but said that they were more likely to do so if civil or political rights were attacked or if motivated by a deep sense of injustice or moral cause. For instance Laura was critical of those whom in her opinion protested for "financial self-interest" (even citing the middle class in the 2001 *cacerolazos*) but then conceded that she would protest "if it were a question of human rights (...). Anything to do with the AMIA⁴, and I'm not even Jewish... or for the Disappeared⁵. I believe in the right to life... and human rights most of all" (Laura, 49, Buenos Aires).

The exception to this, where the violation of *social* rights did ignite particular anger, was perceived intersectional gender and age discrimination. This was mentioned by all of the seven middle-aged women (50-65 years) in the sample. In a country where the gender pay gap was 30% in 2011 (INDEC database), these grievances were justified. But curiously they were not transformed into collective action until the enormous *Ni Una Menos* [Not One Less] protests in 2015-16 when the gruesome femicides of teenagers Chiara Paez and Lucia Perez shocked the nation, galvanised activists and non-activists and raised awareness of the extent of domestic violence and other elements of gender inequality in society.

Recalling Resource Mobilisation Theory, the conditions required for a social movement to emerge are where a shared understanding of grievances are combined with the belief that they can be overcome (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In daily interactions with middle-class citizens it was evident that there was growing awareness of the first part of this equation -widespread discontent. Dissident conversations in shops, on public transport or at social events about the declining state of society would be sprinkled with phrases such as “well, with the government we have...” However, during the research period, incumbent President Cristina Kirchner was leading by far in the polls, then actually won 48% of the vote in the August 2011 presidential primaries, some 35% ahead of her nearest rival (*Dirección Nacional Electoral*, 2011). Neither had there been any major anti-government protests for the preceding three years.

For this reason the second element of the theory was virtually absent among critics of the government – the belief that they could bring about change. Thus the fieldwork period seemed to mark a time of “testing the water” for many of those interviewed, experimenting with how far their feelings were tolerated or shared through subtle comments in public exchanges -until such time that this became well-established on the streets the following year.

The other factor that transformed this passive dissidence into mobilisation was that by 2012, oppositional actors had established diagnostic framing processes (Benford and Snow, 2000) that blamed the President for middle-class citizens’ underlying sense of political neglect. For instance, Jorge Lanata’s fiercely anti-government TV show, *Periodismo Para Todos* [Journalism for Everyone] (principally watched by a middle-class audience), launched in 2012 and quickly gained millions of viewers just weeks before the first anti-government mobilisations. His show launched several investigations into alleged government corruption and mocked and demonised the President and her aides. It thus helped such citizens to

understand that their grievances were shared by millions of others, legitimised their discontent, and gave them the confidence to join collective action organised via social media in 2012.

Victimisation as “neglected citizens” and retreatism

In seeking to answer the demands of the 2001-02 uprisings and of social movements such as the *piqueteros*, *Kirchnerismo* used state benefits and workfare programmes to extend social and economic citizenship rights to previously excluded sectors, such as the unemployed, informal workers and the poorest sectors of society. This post-neoliberal ethos (Wylde, 2016) distinguished them from traditional Peronist governments which had focused social coverage on formally-employed labour. However, an unintended consequence of these policies was that many of the middle-class interview participants (who fell outside the scope of these plans) felt abandoned or neglected and thought that the values they held dear were under attack.

Many also expressed a yearning to recover the material prosperity that they had enjoyed under Convertibility in the 1990s. Of these eroding values, almost half the participants (14) complained that it was impossible to use socially acceptable means to achieve their desired living standards, although this was less pronounced among the young adults (two of the six under 30 years old). Older participants felt futility and despair, as their values of honesty and hard work were deemed to hold little currency in 2011. This had politically demobilising consequences. Almost all (23) mentioned how they felt Argentina’s meritocratic society (another strongly-held middle-class conviction) had been replaced by one which rewarded laziness, violence or corruption. Nicolas (49, Buenos Aires) exclaimed: “It’s as if here there is a mentality whereby an honest person is seen as a fool while the one who screws everyone else is admired”.

Responding to this Durkheimian *anomie* and a perceived breakdown of social norms, several adopted what Merton (1968) described as “retreatism” (rejecting the cultural goal of success and socially legitimate means of achieving it). “Retreatism” had a distinct political dimension among research participants because such reactions linked their fates to perceived discrimination against “middle-class citizens”. About two-thirds of participants insinuated

that traditionally excluded sectors of society were favoured by the existing Peronist government as its traditional and natural electoral constituency. They criticized the supposedly “generous” welfare and unemployment benefits and governing politicians’ impunity despite alleged crimes. As Shakow (this volume) explains, similar views were held by emerging middle-class Bolivians, who felt that the governments’ egalitarian social policies in support of the poor devalued their own efforts to build a career, rewarding laziness instead.

If they insist on giving the poor social plans, I don’t understand why they don’t also look to support the middle class, or say “we’ll do all we can to find you work”. Because unlike them [the poor] we don’t sit here with our arms crossed waiting for money from above.

Sofia, 31, Santa Fe

Carolina echoes this sentiment and ominously predicts a social revolt:

Something is going to explode at any moment. This government is giving out money, left, right and centre; Take, take, take from the hardworking taxpayers. They are the ones who will rebel sometime soon because they are fed up with paying so that others can live for free.

23, Piedras Blancas

Feeling their social position increasingly threatened “from below” as traditional markers of social distinction (income, value of educational qualifications, recent job status, savings) had eroded since the 2001 crisis, interviewees found it difficult to describe how they were distinct from the “working class” or “traditional poor”. The blurring of inter-class boundaries is not a new phenomenon, but intensified after 2001 when the real-terms salaries of those with university degrees fell by 26%, yet those with only primary education increased by 5% (INDEC database).

Cross-class social trust had diminished since 2001 and two thirds (20) of research participants saw themselves as “victims” of the Kirchner (Peronist) government that was historically supportive of the non-European, Mestizo and *descamisado*.⁶ Respondents evoked deep

historical social fissures in Argentinian society that manifest themselves in the form of symbolic racialised violence against internal “enemies” – the poor and the *piqueteros*, the same groups with whom many had marched on the streets a decade earlier.

The “other” as the bad citizen

Interviewees framed themselves as “good citizens” whilst the crime-committing, road-blocking, “work-shy” poor were characterised as “bad”.

14 out of the 30 interviewees identified “insecurity” (crime) caused by the poor as their main preoccupation. Surveys at the time indicated that over a quarter of Argentinians had been the victim of crime or violence. However, the perception of insecurity was up to three times higher than the reality (UCA, 2010). Television news, talk shows and newspaper headlines emphasized “insecurity” in society, and research participants referred to a combination of these stories and friends,’ family members’ or (less commonly) their own experiences when discussing their fears. Media usually depicted poor, dark-skinned immigrants from surrounding Andean countries or local shantytowns as perpetrators.

These tapped into deep-seated fears of “the other” among many middle-class residents. Other researchers (Guano, 2004, see also Shakow in this volume) have explored how middle-class citizens seek to counter the fading social differences between themselves and the structural poor by articulating a consensus on how national modernity is threatened by the illegitimate incursion of the *Mestizo* poor into middle-class districts and the unjust extension of undeserved civil rights.

However, by 2011 the notion of the “bad citizen” appeared to have become uncritically accepted (or what Gramsci terms “common sense”) by those in the interview sample. Consent to be ruled by the existing order could therefore be perpetuated, as even those who had once allied with the indigent poor during the 2001-02 rebellion now viewed them with suspicion.

It’s terrifying these days. Maybe it’s due to all the foreigners in the country. There are loads here from Paraguay, Bolivia and Colombia. It’s full!

Julieta, 86, La Plata

Today it's a struggle between social classes. You can't take anything new with you without someone pulling a gun on you and threatening to kill you for two *pesos*. Today that is how things are. You have to keep your wits about you. It's complete insecurity.

Vanesa, 26, La Plata

Participants often applied ethnic (immigrant/race) and class-based (poor/lower-class) characterisations interchangeably to describe this group whom they felt threatened by. This was perhaps unsurprising given the conflation between "class" and racial origins in Argentina. A handful used overtly racist language about mestizo shantytown-dwellers which was typical of this confusion. Interestingly open xenophobia was expressed in equal measure regardless of age or gender.

This country is made for either those who have a load of money or those blacks [*negros*] who have nothing. The guy who works hard and wants to progress in life has no chance.

Jorge, 36, La Plata

The characterisation of the bad citizen also extended to protest movements. Nine participants had been sympathetic or supportive of the *piqueteros* during the 2001 crisis but felt that their methods had lost "legitimacy". Framed in "citizenship" terms, there was general agreement that the unemployed had the right to have their basic needs covered and to be provided with work, but not to receive state handouts. However, interviewees' concern for the *piqueteros'* rights had since been superseded by anger that their own "right" to freely move around the city in order to exercise their right to work was being violated by constant roadblocks. One participant described their protest methods as "a revolutionary car tax against the middle class." All but two participants were critical of them, this one being typical:

What the *piqueteros* do... and I'm not saying that their demands aren't just but the way that they make them... they annoy so many people who *are* working... What you are restricting is the right to freedom of transit.

Graciela, 50, Buenos Aires

Conclusion: It's all just a little bit of history repeating

Argentinian history since 1955 testifies that change, be it the dominant political ideology or economic model, has only been possible with the tacit majority consensus or even mass mobilisation of the middle class, from the 1955 *Revolución Libertadora* uprising to the civil-military coup in 1976, to Menemismo in the 1990s, to the 2001-02 revolt.

Middle-class involvement in the 2012-13 anti-government protests was significant, although less multi-sectoral than in 2001-02. The ethnographic study conducted here several months prior to their commencement suggests that some of the underlying grievances held by broad middle-class sectors became politicised and soon transformed into active mobilisation. Whilst these protests were not officially organised by any political party, and did not effect immediate change, they did set in motion a series of events in high politics which culminated in an attempt to answer many of their demands.

Electoral opposition was completely divided in 2011, but the 2012-13 mobilisations revealed the existence of an oppositional grassroots movement that needed to be united at the ballot box. Headed by one of the protest movements' most outspoken advocates, Elisa Carrió, initially a Broad Front (UNEN) alliance formed between the Civic Coalition (CC-ARI) and other parties that enjoyed significant middle-class support (including its historic electoral outlet, the UCR, and the Socialist Party). When this project was dissolved in mid-2015, enough headwind had been generated for CC-ARI and UCR to join Governor of Buenos Aires City Mauricio Macri's *Republican Proposal* party to form *Cambiamos* [Let's Change]. This alliance then came to power in December 2015 and presented the demands of the 2012-13 protests – ending corruption, inflation, crime and currency controls – as its flagship manifesto pledges.

To this extent, Argentina's middle class remains an important actor in the process of social change, providing their demands resonate with broader sections of society. The multi-sectoral alliance between the lower-middle class, organised labour, the indigent poor and the unemployed on the streets in 2001-02 eventually provided the electoral basis for *Kirchnerismo*. This began to disintegrate after 2011, and the 2012-13 movement led by the upper-middle class and supported by much of the non-progressive middle class and pockets of the poor morphed into *Macrismo*.

The study also revealed Argentina's middle class' understanding of citizenship to be limited to political and civil rights. Their strong belief in self-sufficiency minimised expectations of social and economic rights for themselves and others. In terms of political mobilization, their liberal rather than republican understanding of citizenship made them much more sensitive to allegations of corruption, authoritarianism, human rights abuses and anti-liberalism than to poverty, unemployment, or even macroeconomic performance. The Kirchner government was performing well on all these latter respective indicators.

Perceived political neglect linked to their middle-class identities held greater weight in *generating* mobilisation against the government, than economic wellbeing brought about by a decade of successive annual macroeconomic growth (bar 2009) of 6-10 percent (IMF) had in *preventing* it. Failing to recognise this was a strategic error of Cristina Kirchner's government.

Kirchnerismo enjoyed substantial popularity from broad sectors of the middle class early on when it was viewed as fulfilling individual and collective *political* demands in correspondence with cherished liberal and civil rights values: removing the Menemist judges, arresting former military leaders accused of genocide, promoting equal marriage, etcetera. Whilst their expectations of social protection from the state remained weak, the growing belief that structurally impoverished, unemployed, "non-deserved" and for some frankly "racially inferior" bad citizens were being lavished with state support, whilst "hardworking", decent, white, "good" middle-class citizens were politically and socially neglected, prompted many to take collective action. These mobilisations were fuelled by the resurrection of historic prejudices and political fault-lines that aggravated existing anti-Peronist sentiment and opposition to a national project, embodied by the President, which they perceived to be diametrically opposed to their own vision of the country.

This perceived injustice was understood well by Mauricio Macri, who was able to construct an alliance of political forces to form *Cambiamos*. Alongside a heavily supportive media, the way Macri tapped into these sentiments and values with subtle and covert imagery and messaging, seducing the middle class without alienating the rest of society or adopting an "anti-popular" discourse, was, , was key to his 2015 election success. Notions of *emprendedorismo* [entrepreneurism], "decency" and of "returning to the world" (meaning the "first world", from which their immigrant grandparents came, by ending the Latin American regionalist policy and developing closer ties with the white, European and North American businesses and

governments) also attracted middle-class voters. Social movements and political parties on the left meanwhile have failed to capitalise on this framing in the same way and must learn this lesson if they are to return to power themselves.

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¹ Highly-educated professionals, middle managers, small business owners or skilled white-collar workers or who are home owners.

² One in five of those in the struggling middle class participated in the protests in the first six months of 2002 alone (World Bank, 2002; Ozarow, 2014, 199).

³ Unemployed workers' movement

⁴ The Jewish community centre that was blown up in a terrorist attack in 1994.

⁵ The 30,000 victims of the 1976-83 civil-military dictatorship.

⁶ "Shirtless", refers to the traditional poor from whom Peronist governments built their supporter base.